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RESEARCH NOTE

An Established Canon? Textbook Orthodoxy in Psychology

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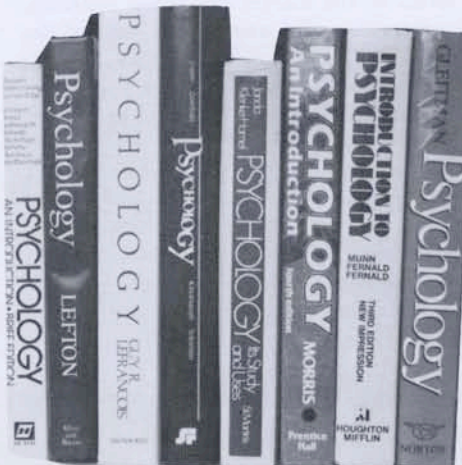
Every spring, as my office is inundated by the annual wave of publisher's examination copies of new textbooks, I am rent by ambivalent feelings: guilt at my inability to examine each new text adequately, along with gratitude for being the recipient of a gift whose market value approaches twenty-five dollars. Why am I not happier? Why do I not find more joy in the process of shopping for a textbook? With so many to choose from, there certainly should be something to satisfy every taste. Yet in point of fact, there is very little to choose from. Despite the illusion of variety, textbooks in psychology are no more different from each other than are competing brands of soap powders, cigarettes or beers. The textbook has become a product to be marketed like any other product by creating the illusion of great variety (and hence of free choice) by producing what David Reisman referred to in *The Lonely Crowd* as "marginally differentiated" items. Textbooks in psychology, and especially in introductory psychology (from which the majority of students will derive their most lasting impression of the discipline), are characterized by a monotonous and increasingly monolithic sameness. There exists in effect a canon in psychology—a set of books all professing the one true faith. The assertion that a canon exists today in psychology is supported by four phenomena in textbook publishing: dogmatism, suppression of controversy, silencing of critics, and catechizing.

The typical introductory psychology textbook leaves students with the impression that there are many *facts* of psychology. There is little attempt to impress upon the reader that most of these "facts" are provisional and tentative, and that in the last analysis there is precious little that psychology knows for certain. That these "facts" are mental constructions founded upon arbitrarily chosen philosophical assumptions is something that is rarely even hinted at. In short, the orthodox ideology is dogmatically presented. The opening sentence in the preface to the introductory text I am now using is typical. It reads: "Although psychology is a

relatively new science, it has developed a standard body of knowledge that all students need to master." (Morris, 1982, p.xi).

The many areas of ignorance in psychology are almost never acknowledged. On those rare occasions when they are acknowledged, an exercise in prophecy invariably follows — the textbook author-turned-prophet assures reader that there is nothing not known today that will not be made known in the future through the inevitable progress of psychological research.

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Controversies within psychology are almost never mentioned in introductory texts. The student is left with the impression that this body of facts is universally agreed upon by all members of the discipline. Controversies are papered over; disagreements are harmonized. The result is homogenization; psychology is presented as a faith, orthodox and catholic.

Introductory texts that do not dogmatically present an orthodox party line from which all serious controversies have been censored just do not get published. Perhaps they do not even get written. Probably the publishers are right in contending that they would not sell. Whatever the reason, the extent to which the degree of unanimity presented in introductory texts exceeds that which actually exists within the field demonstrates that criticism of the established canon is effectively silenced. Within the hallowed walls of your classroom you are free in principle to use uncanonical books; but try to find some if you can!

One final clue that psychology is becoming an ideology with an established canon is the fact that students are required (for purposes of the ubiquitous multiple choice exam) to learn the contents of the textbook. They are not encouraged to consider it, to question it, or to criticize it; they are to learn it. "Take this textbook and commit it to memory," I sheepishly confess is what I tell my own students. But you and I know that that is not education, that is catechism. Multiple choice exams and student guides are the apparatus of catechism, they are not the trappings of a discipline that values free and open inquiry. Yet how many professors can resist the pressures to consider for adoption only those texts that are accompanied by an instructor's manual with test item file?

The dogmatic tone of introductory psychology texts, their suppression of controversy, the sameness of the most popular texts, and their encouragement of the use of methods of indoctrination, all point to the establishment of a canon in psychology.

But it may be argued, since the publishers are responding so sensitively to forces in the marketplace, does this not guarantee that psychologists are getting exactly the kind of textbooks that they want? All professors receive dozens of surveys from publishing houses entreating them to tell in wearisome detail precisely what they would like in a textbook for some specific course. Every complimentary copy of a new textbook includes a postcard on which they are invited

Such an attempt to affix blame or to assign responsibility can only serve to distract us from the fundamental issue. I do not know who is to blame. I only know that the system as it operates serves to establish and fix ever more firmly a canon in psychology. The question whether psychology determines what gets published in introductory psychology textbooks is analogous to the question of whether the public gets what it wants in commercial television programming. The same sameness is evident in both. A product designed to sell to the widest possible market, whether it be television viewers or psychology professors, must be all things to all people; and above all it must risk offending no one. The profit-motivated system that produces psychology textbooks today may actually be delivering the product desired by the majority of

Not only is there a canon then in psychology, but the canon is not under the control of psychology. When the Church established a scriptural canon, they were

Secondly, the market is served by psychology's almost unanimous endorsement of self-interest as the ultimate instigator of all conduct. Whether it is Freudian theory with its pleasure principle, behaviorial theory with its bribes dignified by being called reinforcements, or some social psychological theory such as exchange

theory with its cost benefit analysis, the message is the same -- human beings choose always to act in their own self-interest. Capitalism, of course, rests upon the identical assumption. In fact, the market system would not work unless people acted on the basis of enlightened self-interest. Hence it serves the market to indoctrinate students with the belief that everyone acts on the basis of self-interest, and furthermore that it is virtuous to do so.

The market is served again when psychology transforms wants into needs. Most of what psychology has taught us to call needs are not necessities but rather things that we merely want or desire. By calling them needs we convince ourselves not only that we must have these things, but what is more, that we are entitled to them. Wants and desires are under voluntary control. You can decide to want something a little less if it is not immediately attainable. But needs are not to be denied. You are a passive victim of your needs. If you need something, you are condemned to suffer until you get it. Such attitudes of course play right into the hand of the advertising industry whose job it is to create in the buying public more and more needs for more and more products. They want us to believe that we have a need for their products, better still, that we have a right to their products. "You owe it to yourself," they tell us, "to use the very best." "You need this car!" Nissan Sentra blatantly announces. To the extent that psychology textbooks proclaim a scientific foundation for the notion that we are a bundle of needs, they pander for an economic system that survives by selling more and more throw away products to fewer and fewer consumers.

Finally the market is served by a psychology that takes as its aim the prediction and control of behavior. This fetish of predictability is a phenomenon of the last fifty years or so, of the second half of psychology's century-long existence. And it is a typically American phenomenon. The founders of our discipline were not concerned with prediction and control. There are many other entirely worthy goals for a science of psychology. But in America psychology has been coopted by the market system -- a system that prospers or crashes depending upon the accuracy of its predictions. The business of Wall Street is prediction. Since textbooks announce the business of psychology to be the same, may we not be permitted to speculate that they are in business together, with psychology of course being a subsidiary division of Wall Street.

CULTURAL COMMENTARY

The American Arts and Crafts Movement (c. 1880-1920):

Its Promise For A Better Life In The New Twentieth Century

by Roger T. Dunn
Associate Professor of Art

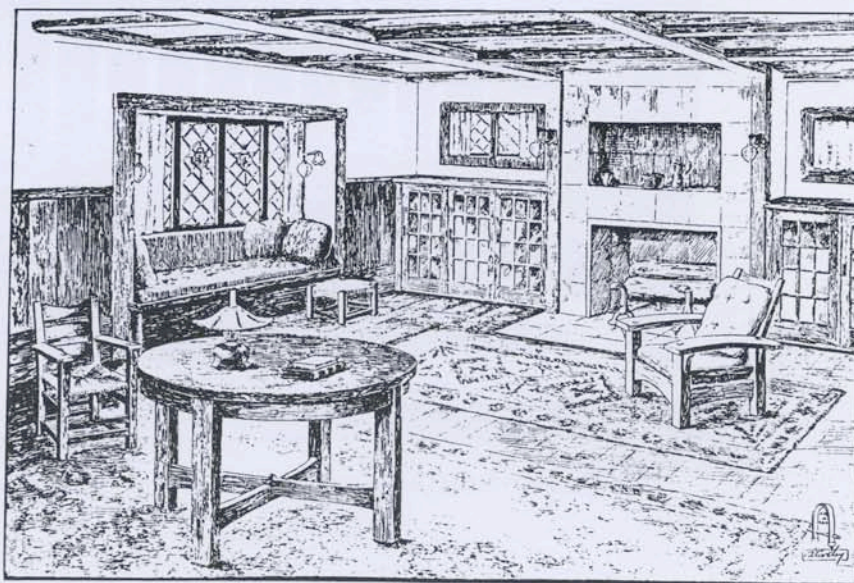
In the last quarter of the nineteenth century there developed in Europe and America a new style in the decorative arts known as the Arts and Crafts movement. It rejected the excesses, pretense and formality of Victorian style homes and furnishings. It also found fault with mass-produced objects in which the design and application of machine-made furnishings showed little regard for function, sturdy construction, pleasing proportions, the natural beauty of materials or the skills of hand-craftsmanship.

The new style, fathered by William Morris in England, was concerned with the social issues of industrial life, and sought to improve the lifestyle of the average family living in the burgeoning urban environment. Increasingly, people served in factories, but were little served in return by factory-made objects or factory life. Morris and other leaders of the movement felt that the traditional virtues of self-esteem, pride in work, family and community values could be re-established by surrounding the average person with objects and an environment that expressed integrity, honesty, and purposefulness in design and function.

In America the leading exponents of Arts and Crafts design and social philosophy were Elbert Hubbard, who founded the Roycroft Community of craft workshops in East Aurora, New York, and Gustav Stickley, who established a furniture firm and architectural enterprise near Syracuse, New York. They preached an approach to design that was followed by many others, including Stickley's five brothers who also set up their own companies. The ideas and designs of Hubbard and Stickley were promulgated by their respective magazines, *The Philistine* and *The Craftsman*, as well as in other widely circulated publications.

That philosophy and lifestyle remain so much a part of our present world that we scarcely think of associating them with the now historic objects of the Arts and Crafts period. For example, the movement promoted the idea of suburban living to allow city workers to stay in contact with the land and enjoy the healthier country environment. Throughout the nation, suburban homes and neighborhoods still bear witness to their origins in the realization of this ideal as well as in the design aesthetic of the

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The Craftsman, April 1902

Living Room by The United Crafts